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Mac Andrew, The Gothic Tradition in Fiction

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Gothic

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Reviews

Elizabeth MacAndrew. *The Gothic Tradition in Fiction*. New York: Columbia U. Press, 1979. 289pp. \$15.00.

The growing number of critical explorations into the Gothic as a viable literary genre during the past twenty-five years has led to the establishment of numerous seminars and undergraduate courses on the subject. The Gothic is no longer regarded as meaningless sensational fare. There are Devendra P. Varma's pioneer study *The Gothic Flame* in 1957, Maurice Lévy's *Le Roman Gothique Anglaise* in 1968, G. R. Thompson's collection of essays *The Gothic Imagination* in 1974, and Coral Ann Howells's *Love, Mystery and Misery: Feeling in Gothic Fiction* in 1978. However, none of these books treats this genre as a continuing tradition. Elizabeth MacAndrew's recent book *The Gothic Tradition in Fiction* looks back over previous criticism, and, while doing so, seeks to do what no other study has done: to define Gothic fiction, to discern its shape as a convention, and to outline its growth through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

In her preface, MacAndrew regards the Gothic in fiction as a convention, since these writers use their convention as "a means of alerting the reader to the kind of work he is engaged with, of guiding him toward interpretation." (p. x) She regards Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) as the work that establishes Gothic fiction as a late eighteenth-century innovation. From this point, she outlines the course of later writers' use of Walpole's innovation. It becomes a convention in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but with an important difference: as the Gothic convention matures, the eighteenth-century notion of absolute moral value gives way to a relative morality.

While she charts the maturation of the convention, she concerns herself with the ideas embodied in it. Above all, MacAndrew sees the ideas in the Gothic as "a variant of the eighteenth-century Sentimental genre, with related structures, forms, and devices. Sentimental

novels reflect an ideal that, coming from God, is possibly realizable: the Gothic represents the distortion of that ideal." (p. 24) Although the relationship of the Gothic to the Sentimental novel has been noted by previous critics, most important among them Coral Ann Howells, MacAndrew presents a detailed analysis of the ways in which the Gothic writers vary the Sentimental convention. In this respect, her book makes a sound contribution to Gothic criticism.

As she demonstrates the evolution of the convention from its origins in the Sentimental novel, MacAndrew moves forward and backward in time over such writers as Beckford, Walpole, Radcliffe, Emily Brontë, Hawthorne, Poe, Hoffmann, Maturin, LeFanu, and Stoker, always basing her study in the growth of ideas about the nature of evil in man's mind and relating these ideas to their expression in the convention — the use of the grotesque, the double, the mad scientist, the Faust figure, dreams and nightmares, houses, portraits, and mirrors. All of these symbols of the convention embody the gradual development of ideas about the nature of evil in man. By the end of the nineteenth century and the publication of Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw*, all moral absolutes have disintegrated into a conscious awareness of moral relativity and ambiguity.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, MacAndrew finds that man, as portrayed in the Gothic convention, has arrived at consciousness. She writes: "psychology has continued to affect concepts of human nature and their reflection in Gothic literature. The course of the Gothic tradition in the twentieth century merits a study of its own for this reason alone." (p. 241) Such a statement brings to mind the intriguing possibilities of just such a study, and MacAndrew points the way toward further investigation.

The Gothic Tradition in Fiction begins with Walpole, carries us through Henry James and Stoker, and in an epilogue discusses Anne Rice's recent *Interview with the Vampire* at some length. In view of this fact it is an extraordinary work of scholarship; it even allows one to forgive MacAndrew when she misspells the name of the heroine of *Dracula* and calls Poe's famous character both Roger and Roderick Usher. Her book is a welcome study of the form and will be valuable to both the Gothic specialist and the reader new to the genre.

Gary William Crawford

Editor, *Gothic*